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SUBJECT: KENYAN MEDIA GOES WILD OVER SENATOR OBAMA

¶1. Summary: Media reaction to United States Senator Barack Obama's (D-IL) visit to Kenya was overwhelmingly positive and included extensive coverage. Over-the-fold, inside articles and letters to the editor by members of the general Kenyan public were almost exclusively positive descriptions and analyses of Obama's key messages on fighting tribalism and corruption, and promoting democracy and development. The Government of Kenya (GOK) reacted negatively in a small number of advertisements and letters but found itself sharply rebuked by the press and public for doing so. End summary.

BACKGROUND

¶2. U.S. Senator Barack Obama, whose father was a Kenyan citizen, visited the country August 24-30 as part of a wider trip through Africa. He was greeted everywhere in Kenya by huge, enthusiastic crowds and a flurry of media coverage. Among other events, his policy speech at the University of Nairobi was carried live on Kenyan national TV and on radio by BBC East Africa. The TV viewing audience was the largest in recent Kenyan history. Anecdotal evidence indicates that rival network staff tuned in to watch the live coverage in their newsrooms, as reportedly did members of the GOK at State House. Those media houses which did not carry the event live excerpted it extensively in television, radio and newspaper coverage. Most media coverage can be broken down into specific themes: "Obama's stand against corruption and tribalism;" and how his visit set the standards for the changes which "all Kenyans strive for".

THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION AND TRIBALISM

¶3. "Obama attacks NARC team on corruption and reforms," which appeared in The Daily Nation (independent, left-of-center) focused on the Senator's references that "(Kenyans) were now crying out for a real change and were dissatisfied with a Government showing continued tolerance of high-level corruption." "Obama terms graft a crisis" (The Standard, independent, populist) and "This is what ails Kenya - Obama" (The People, Investigative, sensationalist) are similar examples. In "Obama hit nail right on head" (Kenya Times, KANU party owned), Obama was praised with the commentary "Yet Obama is right: We must fight corruption if we are to progress and build on the successes we have already achieved".

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

¶4. "Let us pick up the gauntlet Obama has thrown us," a headline appearing in Kenya's second highest circulation newspaper, The Standard, is a case in point wherein the media picked up Obama's themes and urged Kenyans to use his visit as a catalyst. "The fact, as Senator Obama put it, is that the two key challenges that our country faces today are surmountable. All it needs is a critical mass of committed citizens who are ready to challenge the status quo

by speaking out against injustice and mediocrity at first sight". Similar articles, such as "If we truly love Obama, let's practice what he says (Kenya Times)," and "Why our politicians should emulate Senator Obama" (The People) appeared in the main news and commentary sections of every major media house.

GOVERNMENT OF KENYA (GOK) RESPONSE

15. The GOK, which is responding with hypersensitive defensiveness to all criticism the closer we get to general elections in 2007, responded badly to Obama's key themes. In an August 26 advertised statement entitled "Levying of Fees to TV Crew Accompanying Senator Obama Done in Accordance with the Law" in the Daily Nation, the GOK Spokesman disputed the Senator's claim that two U.S. members of his traveling press had been required to pay heavy bribes to get their equipment into Kenya. The GOK stated that the fees paid were legitimate customs duties and that the journalists had received official receipts. These facts were later disputed by the journalists in question.

16. In another example, the Kenyan Ambassador to the U.S. in Washington sent a letter to the Senator with copies to local and international press in which he said "Your (Obama) unprovoked and uncalled for statements were in bad taste" referring to Obama's speech at the University of Nairobi.

PUBLIC RESPONSE

17. The GOK was quickly and resoundingly refuted by the general public and media houses in letters to the editor and commentaries. Public reaction included letters and commentaries such as "Ambassador's reaction a cheap shot at Obama" (Daily Nation) in which the correspondent accused the Kenyan Ambassador of negative political interference and "Duties levied on journalists in Obama crew ill-advised" (The Standard), in which a Kenyan film maker who had traveled around the world with his equipment pointed out that the basis of the airport fee was bad law.

COMMENT

18. Senator Obama's visit created overwhelming, though realistically temporary, goodwill between post and local media houses. A number of senior media officials and personalities praised Embassy PAS for the level of access and assistance they received in covering events. The Senator's comments resonated with post's own concerns and received the kind of coverage press officers normally only dream about. Whether the visit will, in fact, be used by the Kenyan people as a catalyst for change remains to be seen.

RANNEBERGER